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ABSTRACT

A Coordinator of Performing Arts at Western Piedmont Community College in North Carolina describes the challenges and rewards posed by an open-door educational philosophy in which community service is as important as artistic excellence. The college's mission is to serve the special needs of the community, which primarily consists of state institutions for the deaf, for the mentally retarded, for medium security youth offenders, and for the mentally handicapped and the chemically dependent. The teacher's duties also include supervising local community theater productions and high school productions. The collaborative nature of performance enriches both actors and audiences who might not have the chance to hear the message the discipline of theater usually imparts. (RS)

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PERFORMANCE AND THE OPEN DOOR PHILOSOPHY

A Presentation for the
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PERFORMANCE AND THE OPEN DOOR PHILOSOPHY

by Cheryl Oxford

Good afternoon. My name is Cheryl Oxford, and I've been the Coordinator of Performing Arts at Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton, North Carolina, since 1982. During the fall quarter of 1982, I directed Aurand Harris's contemporary children's classic, The Arkansaw Bear--a work dealing with a young girl learning about death. The cast was not atypical of other community college classes I've taught since then. Dennis, who played the mime, was deaf. We communicated through an interpreter and improvised charades. Kathy, who played Star Bright, had dyslexia. She learned her lines by repeating them after me. Louise, a Western Piedmont English instructor recently blinded by diabetic retinopathy, composed and performed an original piano score. After touring area elementary schools, we were invited to present the play at Western Carolina Center, an institution for the moderately to severely mentally retarded. Since residents of this long-term care facility frequently encounter deaths at the Center, our performance of The Arkansaw Bear became part of a grief counseling session. The experience of working with these performers and for this audience introduced me to the challenges and rewards posed by an open-door educational philosophy in which community service is as important as artistic excellence.

Let me tell you a little about Western Piedmont Community College. It is the only one of fifty-eight community colleges in

the North Carolina system offering a two-year Associate in Fine Arts degree in Performing Arts. The College serves Burke and surrounding counties in the foothills of western North Carolina. Our admissions policy provides an open-door access for any adult learner who holds a high school diploma or its equivalent and who can benefit from higher education. Coupled with an open-door admissions policy is the College's mission to provide for the special educational and cultural needs of its host community, Burke County. The major employer in Burke County is the State of North Carolina. Most state employees work in one of the institutions for special populations in Morganton, the county seat with a population of approximately 75,600. Morganton is the home of Broughton Hospital for the mentally ill and chemically dependent; of Western Carolina Center for the mentally retarded; of Western Correctional Center, a moderate security prison for youthful offenders; and of the North Carolina School for the Deaf. In order to serve the special needs of these diverse populations, Western Piedmont Community College provides unique outreach services both on campus and at the various institutions. I'd like to tell you a little about the performance activities I've been involved with during my six years of teaching at Western Piedmont--and how my background in Interpretation has served me in these endeavors.

A typical quarter at Western Piedmont is, in all candor, an exercise in endurance. I am required to teach eighteen work units, the equivalent of six three-hour courses. Given that some production courses meet simultaneously, eighteen work units can

mean as many as eleven different class rolls--significantly higher than most universities but about par for community colleges. My day begins on campus with two or three theatre courses, plus one or two courses in literature or speech. Having what is perceived as an interdisciplinary degree in Interpretation has been an asset to me at Western Piedmont, where the generalist is preferred over the specialist. Since "interpreters" at Western Piedmont are the people who sign classes for the hearing impaired, I am usually considered "the drama teacher," but my background in speech and English enables me to teach additional courses in those areas as well--and to meet the faculty accreditation guidelines of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. I keep an additional office hour each day to meet with students or advisees. Then, in the afternoon, I travel alternate quarters to one of the two high schools in Burke County to direct after-school theatre activities offered through cooperative programming with Western Piedmont. This year our high school productions have included The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, and we're currently in rehearsal for God's Trombones. During the evenings, I supervise community theatre productions sponsored jointly by the College and the Old Colony Players of Valdese, a small town in the eastern end of Burke County. This year, we've presented adaptations of "The Monkey's Paw" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." I'm also advisor for the College's Drama Club, which brings storytellers, one-person

shows, and small-scale theatre works for public performance on campus.

One of my biggest challenges has been building an audience for these curricular, extra-curricular, and community theatre performances. My colleagues in English have been staunch supporters in this endeavor, and I only wish time permitted me to tell you more about the team-teaching network that has evolved between the English and theatre curricula. Several times each quarter, the English classes will turn out in force for campus performances--from a portrait of Anne Bradstreet to a mime by Samuel Beckett; from Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" to Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; from Appalachian Jack Tales to Sartre's No Exit. Since our emphasis is upon literature in performance, the English instructors provide the texts to their classes in advance, teach the works, discuss the performances, and elicit student writing in response. For many of our students, these class assignments at Western Piedmont are their first exposure to the stage.

Frequently, I am invited to bring a show to one of Burke County's institutions for special populations. My answer has always been "Yes, we'll come." These performances at the Morganton facilities which serve mentally ill, mentally retarded, incarcerated, and deaf populations are more rewarding in some regards than performances for so-called "normal" audiences.

At Broughton, a hospital for the mentally ill and chemically dependent, we've provided performances primarily as entertainment. This past spring, for instance, we presented

O. Henry's "The Ransom of Red Chief" at an annual luncheon sponsored by the local Episcopal Church. One of our cast members, Greg, had worked at Broughton for five years as a health-care technician and was well known and liked by patients and staff. He was double cast as the town sheriff and Johnny Dorset's widowed mother. His appearance in bonnet and apron brought howls of delight. Even the folks who were pretty much otherwise checked out watched his scenes--and some of them smiled. My students have also been asked to interact one-on-one with patients, usually something along the lines of face painting for a Halloween costume party. Our regulars are the Broughton Youth Unit, who attend something practically every quarter because, I suspect, their counselors think theatre will do them some good. The kids loved our outdoor production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, not only for the Bard's poetry but also because one of the boys caught an unfortunate black snake on the rolling grassy hillside the campus shares with Broughton. They were less enthusiastic towards Henry James' The Turn of the Screw. They were frankly bored with all the psychological innuendo but ghostly appearances by Peter Quint and Miss Jessel redeemed us in their eyes somewhat. Our score of successes and failures is about even, but I know they'll be back for another dose of culture and social grooming.

At Western Carolina Center, which serves the mentally retarded, my students and I assist with the annual Nativity play, featuring over fifty residents, parents, and staff, and open to the public for a moving display of faith and Christian heritage.

Working with these residents poses a number of challenges: many are physically handicapped as well and confined to wheelchairs; some are deaf; others are nonverbal and communicate with the aid of a symbol board. They all obviously enjoy the stimulation that participation in the pageant provides. While I have no formal training in arts habilitation, I think the secrets for success in such a context are very similar to those used by most directors of Interpretation. Imagination, praise, and lots of patience can turn both real and seeming handicaps into performance assets. Such imaginative performances can transform Shirley, the frail victim of cerebral palsy lacking control of her arms, her legs, or even her neck and larynx, into the Christmas angel.

At Western Correctional Center, a high-rise prison which houses youthful offenders, my readers theatre class joined with selected inmates to present The Second Shepherds' Play for Christmas. After passing through personal interviews, sign-ins, and the inevitable lock up behind bars, we found the young men to be bright and energetic, competent and committed. Although several were felons, these prisoners were models of good behavior. Clearly, they did not want to jeopardize the privilege of being in this production. They were better behaved than some high school students I've worked with recently. Our only difficulty was in abiding by a myriad of prison regulations. An astonishing array of stage props--from bottles to bobby pins--were confiscated and secured until actual performance because they were viewed as potential weapons or even, to my horror, suicide instruments. The tension of bringing young women into a

men's prison, although exaggerated by the prison staff, was real enough and frightening when a fight broke out between spectating prisoners and armed guards. Finally, the College commitment to such joint ventures with the prison has been limited since local public perception of educational opportunities for prisoner rehabilitation seems to be more negative than positive. The drama program, quite frankly, makes better press by interacting with other groups than the incarcerated.

The work with special populations that I am personally most proud of is performances with and for the hearing impaired at Western Piedmont and at the North Carolina School for the Deaf. Our most ambitious effort to date was a bilingual commedia dell'arte piece featuring both speech and sign language. Each role was double cast. A hearing actor's spoken lines were also signed by a shadow interpreter for the deaf. A deaf actor's signs were voiced by a reverse interpreter. After some chaotic blocking rehearsals, the doubled performance began to work for the piece--the villain became twice as nasty, the desire between the chaste lovers "for ever panting and for ever young" was quadrupled, sight gags and physical humor were two times as much fun. We opened some channels of communication with this production and bolstered deaf pride on campus and in the community.

Well, that's a quick overview of my attempts to make performance of literature accessible to special populations. The breadth of this topic has forced me to take aim with a shotgun rather than a rifle. In doing so, I've missed the opportunity to

brag on others of my students who transfer to senior institutions and who rival your best students. But I am also proud of my work involving handicapped performers and audiences that I've told you about today. While I realize that my teaching and directing take place in a unique environment, I would nevertheless encourage you to seek out those "special" populations in your own communities. If the goal of the humanities is to expose students to the human condition, in all its vagaries and variety, then few activities could be more educational, more profoundly humanizing, than performance with and for the mentally, physically, or socially handicapped. If Interpretation does, as we believe, convey a "Sense of the Other" through vicarious exposure to lives different from our own, then surely collaborative performances such as I have described also convey a vital, often visceral, exposure to such Others. I urge you to consider contributing your talents and training in the performance of literature for the enrichment of actors and audiences who might not otherwise have the chance to hear the message our discipline has to share. I urge you to open the door of your own classrooms.